

More Than Words: Some Reflections on Working Visually

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Introduction

1.1 These papers are drawn from the International Visual Sociology conferences of 2004 (Southampton) and 2005 (San Francisco). They have been collected together here because of the possibilities offered by Sociological Research Online to pursue the visual beyond the usual limits of the printed academic journal. On-line publishing allows us to show more images, without losing text: enabling a more sustained and iterative engagement between pictures and text than is normally permitted. More than this, the on-line format of SRO allows us to pursue the visual beyond the flat surface of the page and the, often beautiful but motionless, pictures produced in quality journals devoted to Visual Studies with video forays into movement and sound. The authors published here exploit these opportunities, working visually to transcend the dissonance between the lived theatres of social research on everyday life and the dull and inanimate surfaces on which sociological work is usually rendered. Working visually is not just about methodology - although it is mostly seen in these terms - it is more broadly about how we 'do' sociology.

1.2 Working visually involves a significant shift away from the often oddly lifeless and mechanical accounts of everyday life (Dewsbury 2003) in textual representation, towards sociological engagements that are contextual, kinaesthetic and sensual: that live. Visual work allows us to see the ongoing and embodied practice everyday life, productions that are multi-dimensional and chaotic: skills and performances that cannot be reduced to words and which words alone cannot represent. Visual work embeds its' sociological subjects in context. It places the unfolding of action in space and time, in particular material and symbolic circumstances and emphasises action as the performative arrangement and re-arrangement of these resources. For Sociologists, seeing with visual methods imposes the situated-ness, the embeddedness of social life. The use of moving images takes this further, admitting the kinaesthetic directly into sociological work. Moving images lend themselves to the development of a dynamic sociology engaging with the flow of everyday life. A dynamic Sociology uses visual methods to explore 'doing' and practice: processes of living that are inherently mobile, never at rest. Processes of living that are, too, inherently sensual: done through touch and smell as well as sound and sight. The opportunities that video methods offer, to include sound alongside the visual deepens our engagement with the social world further, encouraging a more richly textured sociology that is both sensual and dynamic.

1.3 Working visually is a way of pursuing a more dynamic, performative, sociology, rather than an end in itself as it has become in its reification as a research method (Banks 2001, Pink 2001, Knowles and Sweetman 2004). This is not to suggest that visual sociology has not also served other ways of doing sociology, it has, it is particularly amenable to ways of working qualitatively and ethnographically in ways that are developed from the Chicago School traditions of 'thick description' (Becker 1981). What we are suggesting is that it has greater potential than this. Our concern is with a sociology that captures this, that is about the 'imaginative creation of worlds' (Thrift and Dewsbury 1999; 422) captured in a Sociology of performances. This special issue, in which the authors use visual imagery in a variety of ways, captures a live sociology of performances that is not possible without photography and video. Each of the papers in this special issue extends our discipline - analytically, epistemologically, methodologically and in the ways in which we think about and imagine the social world - in different directions that go beyond the illustrative potential of images. Images are illustrative too but to render them only illustrative is only to display an impoverished conceptualisation of the visual as simply an example of something that is produced textually. As these papers show, visual work offers far more than this, extending current debates and providing a means for 'sensing new forms of knowledge' (Thrift and Dewsbury 2000; 434)

1.4 Elizabeth Chaplin took photographs to generate captions from their subjects and so capture a slice of life in the street in South London where she lives. Her photographs - frozen moments for comment and analysis - uncover the ambiguity and complexity of household relationships and the ways in which the photographs' subjects think about and present themselves as they appear in the neighbourhood standing in front of their own front door. Chaplin uses this as point of access to private worlds and public faces and to

an exploration of the theoretical potential of the image in social science. As part of a critical analysis of the relationship between image and theory in social science Chaplin points to the tension between the photograph as record and trace that something has happened in which *words* are forced into the subordinate role as description; and the polysemic image incomplete without text/caption that plays to constructionism and in which the photograph takes a subordinate role as illustration of the text. This is an important step on route to new ways of theorising with images.

1.5 Monika Buscher uses video to explore new ways of theorising which take us *inside* social processes and forms of description that do not require the identification of underlying causes: practice *is* theory. Buscher uses the video camera to crack open the imagination, intuition and aesthetic judgement involved in practical creativity in landscape architectural practices - aspects of work under-represented in the Sociology of work. With the video camera she follows, participates and anticipates the unfolding scenes of the work of landscape design in the making of an Edinburgh urban plaza. Freed from the normal limits of human vision, video tapes allow repeat viewings and stop-frames, time travel that enable Buscher to see with the camera that which could not be seen otherwise. The processes she explores are more complex than words alone can convey and her moving images reveal them in just this way: in than more than words. This way of doing sociology exposes the continuous flow of social activities and processes to the gaze; reveals the relationship between technologies of production and people at work in using them; and discerns practical activity in process - not as finished product - and hence provides a way of investigating the fleeting moments composing the social world.

1.6 Monika Buscher and Fiona Candy are both concerned with design - with practical social processes in action in the production of the social world. Design opens onto a materialist dynamic sociology. Candy's essay analytically shifts clothing away from its semiotic and symbolic significance in sociological literature. Pursuing a visual analysis, using camera, video and animation - presented here as stills - she relocates clothing in a relationship with embodied sensuality. Clothes are not only conceptualised as part of a language but a significant mode of everyday living and part of the experience of human embodiment, which portrays clothing in motion on bodies producing the way we feel. Kinaesthetic materiality is captured as performance. In Candy's contribution the visual displays the ambience of human encounter as fleeting and subliminal and opens a space in which to consider the instant judgements with which we navigate the social world. Tacit, non-verbal, empathic bodily forms of communication of identity and connectivity are revealed: things not usefully reduced to words, but better captured as performance. Candy uses the visual in different ways to reveal the complexities of performance and embodiment of the self through 'architectural garments' - jeans - which become a way to investigate and log aspects of everyday life in a more active and dynamic way.

1.7 Max Farrar's photographs unfolds the shifting relationships he and his family formed with people in the black neighbourhood of Chapletown in which they live and in which transcend the binaries of black and white marking neighbourhood and politics from the 1970s. Ranging over thirty years his photographs log and reveals changing times and political contexts as he moves from the 'distance' of a (70s) white political activist engaged with black struggles at an important moment of black self assertion, to the muddier landscapes of the nineties and the present in which black politics are incorporated into the local state. Intimacies formed across racialized boundaries are an intangible effectively captured by the lens for analysis. His photographs question the social gap produced around racialized forms of othering which implicitly raise questions of belonging: showing similarities between black and white (everyday) lives. At the same time the camera plays a part in constructing and sedimenting visual differences between bodies: issues race sociology dares not confront since the dismissal of biological arguments around which racial differences were once constructed and long since displaced by less tangible social differences that have been used to challenge race's veracity as a concept. Farrar's photographs are an invitation to dialogue between racially conceived subjects whose bodies and faces invite viewers to read into the photo their desires and hostilities as they pitch their own lived experience alongside what they imagine the photograph to represent. Overall, this is a politically charged sociology, which intervenes in the politics of race instead of just studying it, collapsing the dichotomies between theorising and action. This essay opens a window onto the racial order and invites its emotional transcendence in opening a space to imagine things another way.

1.8 Erica Barbiani's exploration of Calcutta through visual expressions of its relationship to its patron goddess Kali offers an imaginative postcolonial commentary which, in photographs, video, poetry, literature, sound and social commentary transports the reader to the urban spaces in question and offers a tangible point of access to the city's relationship to its goddess and the contemporary practices and social relationships in which she appears. This reveals the polyvocality of the icon through shifts in meaning, context and place. The experience being in Calcutta is heightened by the sound track to the video with its street noises and local music, which places the 'reader' in the city in a way that has a sensual immediacy, in which you can imagine being in the temples for the festival of Kali Puja. This offers a focussed point of

access to multiple of intangibilities in the city that are about colonialism and its current reinscriptions. As Abbas (1997) says about Hong Kong, colonialism is both the most obvious thing about the city and the most illusive. Postcolonial literature is unable to evoke the 'feeling' of colonialism in the way this essay does. Additionally it supplies an extensive visual inventory of the images of Kali and their environment: a rigorous research technique in documenting the field in the tradition of Collier and Collier (1986) and later visual anthropologists.

1.9 For you, the audience, these papers invite your engagement. Not only do they seek to develop extended arguments and new forms of sociological representation. They also seek to transform sociological participation, drawing the audience 'inside': engaging us, as embodied, sensual beings in the living details of the thing we seek to understand.

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9th March 2005

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